

The Echo

Volume 2014 *The Echo*

Article 35

2014

Five Alive

Bryan Betts

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/echo>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Illustration Commons](#), and the [Photography Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Betts, Bryan (2014) "Five Alive," *The Echo*: Vol. 2014, Article 35.

Available at: <http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/echo/vol2014/iss2014/35>

This Creative Nonfiction is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Echo by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.

banjo, n.

Pronunciation: /'bændʒə ʊ/

Forms: Also (earlier) **banjore**, **banjer**.

Etymology: A corruption of BANDORE n.1, through African slave pronunciation, ban'jōre, ban'jō.

1.

a. A stringed musical instrument, played with the fingers, having a head and neck like a guitar, and a body like a tambourine; a modification of the bandore.

[EXCERPTED FROM THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY]

* * * * *

I bought my first banjo in high school for a couple hundred dollars, splitting the cost with my younger brother, who, like me, had recently developed an interest in learning to play. My dad handled the transaction after finding it for sale on Craigslist, and one day it just appeared in our living room, protected in a black case with an uneven matte finish, the instrument like a meteor that had fallen from the sky, an object without history or context.

The instrument sat next to the fireplace beside my brother's keyboard and my acoustic guitar, a Yamaha my dad had purchased for his sister while a Navy mechanic stationed in Japan (she returned the gift, unable or unwilling to learn to play it). There was also a white Fender Stratocaster, on indefinite loan from a guitar teacher with whom I no longer took lessons, as well as other miscellaneous instruments lying on and around the hearth: a glockenspiel and mallets; drumsticks and practice pad; an electric kazoo I had bought my brother a couple years before, a novelty item played once or twice and disregarded; a harmonica and harmonica holder (a metal apparatus that loops around the neck like orthodontic headgear) purchased to help me emulate a troubadour from Hibbing, Minnesota.

I started by unlocking the case's five fasteners — spring-loaded, they each produced a satisfying metallic click as they flipped up. Inside, the banjo sat nestled within the case's fuzzy interior lining. I grabbed it by the base of the

neck and pulled it out. The instrument was heavy, heavier than the Yamaha and Fender guitars, much heavier than it looked. The instrument's circular head, ringed with a metal hoop that stretched taut the percussive membrane, weighed the instrument down, the distribution of mass like that of a sledgehammer. "Gold Tone," written in black across the yellow wood headstock, identified the manufacturer. The four tuning pegs were a translucent white plastic resembling pearl. The fretboard was made of a dark brown wood, inlaid with silver-colored diamonds marking fret positions. Up five frets was another tuning peg for the fifth string, pitched higher than the other four. (I now know that this is considered a reentrant tuning that breaks the ascendant ordering of string pitches characteristic of the guitar and many other stringed instruments.) I followed the strings down the banjo, across the white head and over the three-columned wooden bridge to the tailpiece around which looped the string ends. A black strap with plastic hooks attached to brackets circling the banjo's metal hoop. I adjusted the strap, slipped it over my head, and took a seat, setting the banjo in my lap. I'd played banjos in music shops before, but it still felt awkward and unfamiliar to hold. With my thumb pad I strummed across the strings.

The first notes were pure; bright and clear, they broke the silence and filled the room. It seemed as though the sound itself refracted light, diffusing it and painting the white walls in warmer shades.

No, that's not right. The first strum was tentative, and the strings, thinner than a guitar's, must have caught on my fleshy thumb. The sound must have been a series of loud, arpeggiated plucks, like snare drum shots, together sounding a G chord.

Or did I strum with the nail of my forefinger in imitation of the indie musician whose unorthodox playing was part of the reason I decided to pick up the instrument? Or did I see the plastic thumb picks and metal finger picks in the case and, recognizing them as the hallmark equipment of three-fingered bluegrass, try playing with them? Maybe it doesn't matter.

However I played, the sound was distinctive, not at all like my acoustic guitar. My guitar sounded warm and welcoming but also neutral, standardized, difficult to hear when in a mix with other instruments. But the banjo was not only loud — it had an accent, though I had trouble identifying it. It sounded like one of the old men from the Baptist church I attended; in a thick southern drawl, it cracked corny jokes and inquired about family

members, peppering remarks with biblical language. ("Yessir, I'm old as Methuselah but I ain't never ...") It also sounded like a stereotype, a cross-eyed mountain man, sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair, looking out over a lonesome Appalachian valley, wearing overalls with one strap, a piece of straw sticking out from between crooked teeth. It sounded also like a folk revivalist, shirt sleeves rolled up, reciting country aphorisms to a big city crowd, performing authenticity.

I heard all those accents and more as I fumbled to form chords and make music with the new toy. I enjoyed listening to that accent, listening for what it was saying and what it meant.

* * * * *

In the second grade, my school decided that I needed to attend speech classes to improve my articulation. My parents agreed. I cried the first time an administrator tried to take me out of my regular class to go to the speech therapist. I didn't want to leave my peers. It was unsettling to think I didn't know how to talk.

* * * * *

I imagine that Joel Walker Sweeney would linger backstage, or in a small tent next to the big top, before he would perform in the years leading up to the Civil War. While he sat, an assistant would take a piece of cork and hold the end to a candle flame until it smoldered. After letting it cool, he'd apply the burnt charcoal tip to Sweeney's face and hands. His skin would become darker than any man's skin, darker than the darkest night, than an all but impossible abstraction. Additional red makeup, applied thick, would exaggerate his lips. A wig would give him wooly hair, and tattered clothing would complete the ensemble, transforming the white musician from Appomattox, Virginia.

But Sweeney was not yet in character. He would chat with the other performers backstage and complain about the heat or the cold or the rain or the snow. Perhaps he would spread out a newspaper and read of happenings in Washington, cursing the divided Congress and laughing at a caricature of a dogmatic abolitionist. Or he would sit and collect his thoughts, rehearsing in his mind the show's songs and dances. Maybe he'd think back to his childhood, the days spent on the family farm, and the black servants

who worked for his father, the slaves he would later claim taught him the music he now performed. Sweeney would wait backstage while an emcee primed the crowd with homespun jokes and apocryphal anecdotes, and when he heard his cue, he would grab his banjo and step onstage before the farmers and factory workers, businessmen and doctors, coal miners and shipbuilders and all the rest who had come to see him transmit the culture of their country's enslaved underclass.

Sweeney would play a five-string banjo, a variation on the black slave's gourd banjo that legend would later identify as his creation, though scholars now question that narrative. Sweeney's banjo was made with a hardwood like maple or rosewood, tonewoods selected for their acoustic properties. Instead of a gourd, the sheepskin head stretched over a wooden, open-backed hoop. The fingerboard, like a violin's, lacked frets. Catgut strings, made from the fibers of animal intestines, extended the length of the fingerboard to the headstock, curly-shaped like the flag of an eighth note. When played, Sweeney's banjo did not sound the bright tones of a modern banjo with steel strings. The pitch was lower, the timbre more mellow, but even then, it evoked another world.

As Sweeney performed — for his white audience, rich and poor, American and English, once even for Queen Victoria — the lyrics narrated his co-performers' theatrics.

*Some folks say dat a nig-gar wont steal!
But I cotch one in my cornfield
So I ask him bout dat corn and he call me a liar
So I up wid my foot and I kick him in de fire*

*O whar did you cum from
Knock a nigger down
O whar did you cum from
Knock a nigger down.*

Other songs, performed in character, sought to document the primitive rhythms of the slave's life.

*What are the joys of White Man here?
What are his pleasures say?
Me want no joy, no ills me fear*

But on my Bonja play:

*Me sing all day, me sleep all night
Me hab no care, my Heart is light
Me tink no what tomorrow bring
Me happy so me sing.*

Black slaves must have seen Sweeney perform. I wonder what they thought of his art. Did they smolder in barely repressed rage at their music's adulteration? Or did they even care, for what could cultural appropriation compare to the indignity of their chains? (Unless they recognized it as another shackle.) Did they celebrate that their oppressors had adopted their music? Did they see flattery alongside defamation in white society's imitation? Did they see themselves in it? Did they laugh because they were in on the joke, appreciating the slapstick antics of the "Ethiopian delineators?" Or did they sense they were at its end?

Did they like the music?

*Now white folks, I'd hab you to know,
Dare is no music like de old banjo,
And if you want to hear it ring,
Jist watch this finger on de string.*

When the show was over, I imagine that Sweeney would return to the side tent or back room and find a bucket of water. Cupping his hands, he would splash his face. The charcoal would mix with the water, and cloudy black drops would streak down his face and fall to the floor. With his handkerchief he would rub off the red makeup. He would take off the wig and tattered clothes and put on a clean shirt and suit jacket, pulling out a comb to fix his hair. He might greet a few loitering spectators and then check on the evening's proceeds. Later he would return home, and after dinner, he would lounge in the parlor and read. And then I like to think he would pick up a banjo leaning in a corner and play for himself. Did it sound different to him then, no longer in drag?

* * * * *

I spent a semester in China my junior year of college, studying the language at a university in Suzhou, an ancient city famous for the elaborate

system of canals criss-crossing its urban landscape. (Marco Polo claimed he visited the city in its heyday and hailed it as the “Venice of the East”; my Chinese roommate countered that Venice was the “Suzhou of the West.”) The trip was the first time I spent more than a couple weeks outside the country, my greatest success in efforts to explore the world beyond the suburb in South Carolina where I grew up. I wanted “cultural immersion” to use the sales pitch for such trips, to experience China as more than a tourist and to be recognized as more than an outsider. I had an advantage in this: as a Korean-American, I could pass as Chinese to all but the most discerning eye. But speaking passable Chinese was another matter.

My roommate, Tuo Kai, was a student at the university majoring in English as a second language. He was tall and lanky, his hair short, his glasses frameless, his demeanor alternating between overly serious and awkwardly jovial. He grew up in western China and was one of a small group of students at the university from a different province. He spoke English imperfectly but with confidence, often using odd expressions that I suspect he picked up from a textbook or Hollywood film. Other elements of his speech were entirely his own — my American peers and I called them Tuo Kai-isms — like his habit of expressing delight with a drawn-out, “Won-der-ful!”

We each had a lofted bed with a desk underneath, the loft a creaky metal frame that always seemed about to collapse. Weeknights we would spend several hours sitting at our desks with our backs facing while we studied each other’s native language. Sometimes he’d ask me to proofread an essay for class, but more often he’d ask about American culture — about movies, music, television shows, books. Other times he’d ask about whether specific words or phrases were commonly used. I’d try to give a direct answer but would often provide too much context, citing circumstantial exceptions and regional differences and other unnecessary information for someone learning English as a second language. Regional differences interested him though, and I’d try to explain them. I’d caricature a Southern speaker (“Well, I ain’t never been there, but if y’all are a-fixin’ to go ...”) and a valley girl (“And then I was like, ‘No way,’ and then she was like ...”). Once I explained African-American English by reading from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (“Doan’ you hear me? Shet the do’!”).

I would ask Tuo Kai similar questions, but unlike him, I lacked conversational proficiency in the language I was learning, struggling to pronounce even basic Chinese phrases. (“Ni hao. Wo shi meiguoren. Ni mingbai le

ma?”). Pitch could change meaning, but I inflected words at random, unable to tell the difference. I would need to repeat myself two or three times before Tuo Kai could make sense of my anglicized sounds. I spoke with an accent I couldn't hear, and yet it named me — as an American, as different. It made me visible when I wanted to blend in, separate when I wanted to belong.

* * * * *

Each year since starting college, my brother and I have traded who takes the banjo and who takes the guitar. This year, I got the banjo. I keep the instrument under my bed, atop its black hardshell case. Many days, when I finish with classes and return to my apartment, I set down my backpack, filled too full with books and binders, and, kneeling, take the banjo from its resting place, grabbing it by the base of the neck and slipping its black strap over my shoulder. I sit at the desk where I now write and place the instrument on my lap, the neck angled toward the ceiling. With my left hand, I feel for frets and chords while my right hand assumes its position and shape — thumb resting on the fifth string, other fingers bent towards the palm, forefinger jutting out slightly so that I can strike the strings with the back of the nail, which I grow out for that purpose.

I play most often in the clawhammer style, so named for the shape of your hand. It's also called *frailin'*, *flailin'*, *rappin'*, *frappin'*, *clubbin'*, and the ol' Kentucky knock, among other names. The nail of your forefinger first picks a melody note on the downbeat. Then you strum a chord and, as you finish, pluck the high fifth string with your thumb. The banjo drones in reply: “Bum-ditty. Bum-ditty.” It's a simple, rhythmic, but versatile style first developed by black slaves, the first to play the banjo in its African proto-forms. Bluegrass is now the more widely-known playing style, with its rapid fire notes in a grandstanding flurry of eighth note rolls.

Most of the tunes I know are old time standards. “Rye Whiskey.” “Cripple Creek.” “Shady Grove.” These songs and others have become part of an unofficial anthology and mythological tradition, in no small part due to the folk music revival's efforts to preserve and valorize America's musical roots — the people's songs, the commoner's melodies, the proletariat's anthems. One scholar has called the banjo “an anti-modern machine.”

The banjo no longer feels awkward to hold. The weight is familiar. I form

chords and run through scales from muscle memory. The sound too, though still distinctive, is less strange, more like the voice of a family member, a loud-mouthed uncle or nasally aunt heard about the din of a family reunion. And yet, as I play, there are still rifts: temporally between the banjo as instrument and artifact, familiar and foreign. Philosophically there's a distance between myself as subject and the banjo as object — irony, an inauthenticity, characterizes the relationship. The banjo feels like it belongs to someone else. But to whom? To its inventors? Its popularizers? Its conservers and recoverers?

When I finish playing, I slip off the strap and return the banjo to its resting place, under the bed or leaning in the corner. I return to classwork and all the rest that occupies me as a college student.

But the banjo is not still. The membrane replies to footsteps and resonates with the drone of the apartment's heating system. The fifth string vibrates.